

# Some Magazine Fiction for the Roaring '40s

A FRIEND of ours complained recently that an average American magazine was simply a high school paper, once removed, edited for the perpetually adolescent.

"Begin with the covers," she said. "Just one succession of yellow headed, cherry lipped girls, holding up mirrors or powdering their noses or smiling at a daisy. And when you get inside, what do find? Every single story is about some young thing in the hunting season. Page after page of how they met and loved and quarrelled and made up and finally lived happily forever after."

"I wish editors would think of middle aged people occasionally. After all, a fair proportion of the reading public is grown up. I'm not out of sympathy with youth and love; I like romance, but I'm fed up with it. I'd like some stories about people my own age—people past 40, and I'd like them done by writers who have been to at least one decennial reunion."

There is some justification for her complaint. Love and wedding bells and adventures in romance do predominate in magazine stories. But we find this month, for instance, quite a tendency to extend fiction beyond the early mating season. Even in the matter of covers there is hope. The February *Everybody's Magazine* has a bit of a village square in winter, showing a white church and a big, bare elm. It was drawn by Charles S. Chapman, and it stands out on the newsstands as a refreshing change from that everlastingly pretty girl. There is a good story, too, *Forty-Five*, by Donal Hamilton Haines, which ought to appeal to readers of that age.

"There are," says Mr. Haines, "few spectacles more pathetic than the bewilderment of middle age." Edw. Blenheim, who had done nothing but work all his life, feels this bewilderment when ordered by a doctor to let business alone for three months and play. He has plenty of money, but doesn't know how to spend it, having become a machine which has perfected only the process of taking in. At a fashionable seaside resort Blenheim meets Henry O. Burke of Akron, Ohio, also in quest of health. The pair set out earnestly to atone for neglected youth. Their adventures are amusing and pathetic; there is no attempt at burlesque. In the end these two men with "growing girls and graying hair" find what they need, but not by way of golf, beach parties or the new dances.

*The Beauty Fountain*, by Jack Boyle, in the January *Cosmopolitan*, has a hint of the same idea, told in very different vein. Ten elderly women in search of lost youth go to Beauty Fountain Dell, managed by two genial crooks, Phoney Dick and Overcoat Bennie. Here they take the treatment, pellets, containing in concentrated form the essence of youth, and spring water which has mystical, rejuvenating properties. But Phoney Dick and Overcoat Bennie are not permanently successful in revealing to the world woman's beauty, which is sometimes misad but never lost. They do, however, set a new world's record in running when the after effects of the cure are discovered and Mrs. Phoney Dick, known as Nellie O. Nell, leads the Amazonian phalanx which rushes toward them.

A story in the same number of the *Cosmopolitan*—namely, *The Great Friends*, by

Gouverneur Morris—is designed for grown-up people, preferably those cynically minded. It's about two men, Charnley and Boxer, who have been divorced by their wives. Both men are writers; one has the fault of not letting himself go enough, the other lets himself go too much. In partnership both go about right. After they have evolved from hack-writers to immensely rich Broadway playwrights the wives want to be reconciled. And the answer is the title of their greatest hit, *Never Again!*

The author is one of those men who Understand Women. He Understands them so well that he believes men are better off without them. The wives of the great friends are scolds, neglectful of their husbands' writings, untruthful, extravagant, unreasonable, selfish, unjust and mercenary. Typical women, we are led to infer. Mr. Morris explains that possibly some of the failings of women are due to the fact that "man has deceived woman into the notion that she is a creature beyond censure."

"Take any story," he says (we think he could quite justly make an exception of his own work) "in which a man falls in love with a girl. Has she any faults?"—the answer being an emphatic no. Mr. Morris says that woman's exalted opinion of herself is all due to contemporary literature. "The modern woman feeds on it, and she owes her modernity to the spoiling she has had in the literature of the last three generations."

Speaking of revelations about women by men leads us to a revelation of man by a woman, in the February *Woman's Home Companion*. It is "a little personal experience story of husbands and their ways," by a woman who is happily married—*A Fortunate Wife*. It's rather pleasant, after the dialogues of Boxer and Charnley in Mr. Morris's story, to read of a man who in twelve years never spoke a cross word, who gave his wife money, painlessly, and even when he didn't want to go out with her, never said so, but just went. The real value of this human document, however, is in the explanation of these exceptional qualities of the husband. Thus:

All men are fundamentally alike, but very few women really understand their basic characteristic. Once women grasp the idea, it's very simple and easily applied. There are no men in the world—they never emerge from boyhood. *The Fortunate Wife* knew this and treated her husband accordingly. "Men are just grown-up little boys"—all cases of arrested development, all needing mothers in perpetuity, all having to be continually petted and loved and made much of.

Whether Corinne Low is past 40 or not, she has considerable wisdom about love. A pity her story *The Good Little Vamp*, in the February *Red Book* was not given a better title. It is a dignified story, although its name suggests one of those professionally clever ones so much in fashion. At the beginning Stephen Alderdyce discovers that while his wife loves him she would rather be with any one else in the world. He says to her, bitterly, "You haven't any curiosity about me. Why, nowadays when you and I look at each other—my God, why it's like looking at a swivel chair! We know that a swivel chair has certain restriction of activity. It can go backward and forward and around, and when we've learned that we don't expect any more surprises from it. That's what I am—the swivel husband. You know exactly what I'll say, how I'll act, and there isn't one thrill of wonder—no, not one—left in you."

Alderdyce's feeling of insignificance is further enhanced by his boy, "a stranger son," so unlike his father that he insists upon reading *The Scudder Boys* in the *Balkans*, instead of *Iranhoe*, as prescribed. While everything seems to be going wrong with Alderdyce, he comes into contact with Sylvia Beaton, who is the good little vamp. The wisdom of the story is in the turn at the end, when Alderdyce finds that the value of the adventure was that Sylvia made him believe in himself—restored his self-esteem. And when, as a philosopher says, you can fall out of love with some one who has made you fall in love with yourself, the experience is worth while. Or,

as Alderdyce put it—"we first get our talismans. Then we learn to do without them. They're only made to release something—then we ourselves have got to go ahead."

Love released Henry Mills in a somewhat less triumphant way in *Wild Raspberries*, by Mrs. Henry Dudeney, in the January *Harper's*. The plot is not new but the people are real and natural. There is Hetty, dying of a broken heart after seven years of terrible silence on the lonely farm, and Sophy Simcox, who comes to nurse her. Sophy was "bright, tinkling, alert. She was trumpety—a jewel you might buy at a fair." Hetty was "a cameo, set round with flame." Henry was not at home with her, she was too fine for him. She wanted quiet and the peace of the hills, but he, like Sophy, was "all for a bit of life"—in London. Death came to release Hetty and give Henry to Sophy, who had taught him to laugh again, restored his gladness and strength and freed him "from the irksome restraint of a nature more stable than his own."

A characteristic of grown-up fiction is that the happy end is not compulsory. Only the very young see life as a romantic adventure, moving to a dramatic climax, followed by a glorious conclusion. Older people know that for life there is no orderly map, there are long trails and by-paths and sometimes roads that wind endlessly up hill. Often there isn't a climax, in the editorial sense; the road ends abruptly or simply trails off. That's why stories following the patterns of a correspondence course seem unreal. *Munsey's* is among the courageous in publishing stories that are little pictures of life without great concern for the conventional conclusion. In the February number *A Drama in Dust*, by Herman George Scheffauer, is a beautiful and tragic glimpse of the way an old actor came to the end of the last act. Selvin, dismissed from the hospital with fever still smoldering in him, wanders to the abandoned Thalia Theatre and in the empty, barren structure relives his old triumphs, becomes Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth and Othello once more, and sees again Eugenie, whom he loved.

*Scribner's* widely advertised February number makes a fictional excursion into present day problems via *Miss Lizzie—Parlor Bolshevik*, by Mabel Hill. It's very different from Katherine Fullerton Gerould's Bolshevik story, *An Honest Man*, in the November *Harper's*. Mabel Hill writes with humor and there is a good deal of interest in Miss Lizzie's little flirtation

with the social unrest. But she was such a complete amateur and her radicalism had such an insipid vanilla flavor that it is hard to believe in the necessity of her nephew's timely rescue. Getting down to fundamentals, there isn't much humor in social revolution, nor do Miss Lizzies affect them one way or another. So Mabel Hill's story, whatever its purpose, rings no alarm clock for the reader. Even the nephew's exposition of the present situation in America, with "noble evolution" as the cure, fails to carry weight. It goes with the story just as the patriotic recitation goes with closing exercises at school. Mrs. Gerould's Bolshevism, which began in a parlor, too, is infinitely more convincing, because she is much more in earnest and to her the revolution is a grim reality.

One way of escape from the perils of Bolshevism and other ills is found by William Wadsworth Wildman in H. T. Avery's *Corpus Delicti* in the February *Atlantic Monthly*. William (or Waddy, as he hated to be called) was extremely eccentric and so voluble and argumentative that when there was no one else with whom to dispute he talked vociferously to himself. The tribulations he suffered from a wife who was an inferior cook and the unexpected turn taken by his great invention, "Wildman's Fire Escaper," are highly diverting. To those past forty the story has a happy end. Amid the throes of strikes, influenza, blizzards and other major and minor afflictions what could seem more restful than "a fine room, splendid, well cooked meals, the full enjoyment of a thousand acres of farm and park lands, access to workshops and tools wherewith to work his invention, freedom from responsibility and annoyances and, in short, an ideal life for the balance of his years?"

And, after all, what does it matter if it is an insane asylum?

ARTHUR WALEY, whose translations from Chinese poets were published in two volumes by Alfred A. Knopf, is also the author of a volume of translations from the Japanese, yet to be brought out in this country.

THE current number of *The Authors' League Bulletin* contains a childish something signed by Cosmo Hamilton, entitled *The Higher Criticism*, and so labelled with a sub-title as to indicate that the intention was to burlesque Mr. Heywood Brown. Without the label no one would have known what was intended.

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